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COMMUNITY PROFILE: Laramie, Wyoming

“There’s a myth about downtown revitalization,” says Andi Summerville, the mayor of this historic railroad and university town two hours north of Denver. “People think you need a single, massive project or tons of money to bring an area back. But we didn’t have either one...We’re the poorest community per capita in the state, yet we’ve created one of the most vibrant historic cities anywhere in Wyoming.” At latest count, virtually every storefront is occupied, there’s a calendar of events packed with celebrations, and an explosive demand for downtown housing.

Laramie Main Street Alliance

Organization Founded: **2005**

City Population: **32,382**

Public and Private Reinvestment: **\$16.5 million**

Net Gain in Businesses: **100**

Net Gain in Jobs: **481**

Building Rehabilitations: **283**

Statistics recorded are from 2009–2017

What you need, Summerville says, is vision, commitment and volunteers. “Local residents who care are the key. Once they’re invested, you can’t believe what a town can accomplish.”

Twenty years ago the historic core of Laramie was struggling. There were few thriving businesses. Only one or two restaurants remained open and several dilapidated buildings were so far gone that they required demolition. Despite being home to the state’s four-year university, with more than 14,000 students, there was limited interaction between town and gown: Students hardly participated in life downtown at all. They ate on campus, socialized on campus and stayed on campus.

Worst of all, there was no unified vision for what downtown could become, says Trey Sherwood, executive director of the Laramie Main Street Alliance, an Accredited Main Street America program. “No one could figure out what to do. City officials had one idea, local merchants had another, the downtown development authority yet another.”

That all changed when Wyoming Main Street provided the funds for a new, comprehensive downtown plan. Suddenly local stakeholders were sharing priorities, reviewing lessons learned and identifying short- and long-term goals.

Sherwood then led the effort to bring government and private entities together under a single Main Street America umbrella, “moving from multiple boards and multiple nonprofits pushing for revitalization, to a single one-stop shop. Now we can focus effectively on precisely what to do.”

Part of the answer came from six blocks away at the campus of the University of Wyoming. The university’s art museum was about to close for renovations, and public access to the collection would be restricted for months. So local leaders came up with a novel solution: What if, instead of canceling gallery exhibitions, the community of Laramie became the gallery? Curators could mount a sculpture exhibition in public spaces where the works of art would be accessible to everyone—students, merchants, residents and tourists.

The bold proposal became a booming success, and inspired Laramie’s award-winning Mural Project, an ongoing public art display that transformed the look and spirit of downtown and became a magnet for investment. Today there are scores of colorful murals painted on walls throughout historic Laramie.

Each is painted by a local artist and celebrates the community. “Instead of murals that just tell the story of Laramie’s past, we invite artists to depict what they love about living here now,” Sherwood explains. “It’s an outdoor, whimsical approach to revitalization that makes the town look and feel completely different. And it made everyone here hungry for more.”

CREDIT: SYDNEY EDWARDS

POPULAR ANNUAL EVENTS SUCH AS LARAMIE JUBILEE DAYS (RIGHT) AND LARAMIE BREWFEST (BELOW) ATTRACT THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE DOWNTOWN EVERY SUMMER.

When property owners saw murals beautifying a building nearby they said, “My building needs attention, too,” and private money began flowing to the historic district.

The domino effect has been nothing short of astounding. Laramie now boasts 272 locally-owned businesses in a historic district that covers nearly 30 blocks. There are 35 restaurants and bars and about 70 retailers, including specialty gift shops, clothing stores and art galleries. But there are also professional offices, nonprofits, start-ups and—significantly—nearly 100 residential units. According to Laramie’s Main Street America program, 95% of the available space downtown is occupied. And if you ask business owners why they’ve located in the historic area they cite the city’s mural program, walkability, affordability and indispensable support from Main Street.

Alec Shea is one of those business owners. A transplant from the East who moved to Laramie two decades ago, he owns two downtown businesses with his wife, Jodi: the Curiosity Shoppe, which sells everything from cards to furniture, and Sweet Pickles, a separate children’s toy and clothing store.

Shea became interested in revitalization after his wife attended a National Main Street Conference in Baltimore. “I was writing grants at the time and helping nonprofits when she came back home said, ‘We are being wasteful here, building all these new things but neglecting our past. We need to reinvest in our downtown!’ She was so energized and confident in Laramie’s potential that we jumped when we had the opportunity to buy the historic Curiosity Shoppe.”

As a business and property owner, Shea has appreciated firsthand the sweeping effects of revitalization. “When I moved to Laramie everybody said you had to go to Fort

- 272 locally-owned businesses**
- 35 restaurants & bars**
- 70 retailers**
- 100 residential units**
- 95% occupancy**



Collins, more than an hour away, to buy anything. But not anymore. We’ve educated residents on the benefits of buying locally and keeping dollars here where they live.”

Moving forward, the Laramie Main Street Alliance’s focus is on growing locally owned businesses, creating innovative partnerships and public art projects while encouraging the construction of additional residential units.

One such project was the development of an empty lot in the heart of downtown, which was the result of the loss of the historic Empress Theater. Laramie Main Street, the City of Laramie, and a local nonprofit grocery store, Big Hollow Food Cooperative, Inc., partnered together and received a \$3 million dollar grant from the Wyoming Business Council to develop the site. Big Hollow, the committed tenant, expanded into the new location in July 2018, doubling the size of their sales area, increasing their inventory from local ranchers and creating new jobs.

Trey Sherwood says that the Main Street Approach worked here because “it wasn’t a government effort or a state agency or anyone else telling investors here what to do...It was grassroots—the voice of the community—at work. Anyone can plug into our revitalization efforts, whether you’re a business or property owner, an entrepreneur or a historic preservationist.” The formula just makes sense. “You identify the authentic assets in your community and bring them to the table. Our success comes from that single attribute: We are true to ourselves.”

The mayor puts it even more simply: “Never underestimate the power of arts and culture,” she says. “They can change absolutely everything.”

CREDIT: JAMY CABRE

